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ABSTRACT

A study examined personal and professional development experienced by women youth workers participating in five 5-day, residential, single-sex, outdoor education courses in England. Analysis of diaries and poetry at the end of the courses and questionnaires completed 1 year later by participants and their managers yielded findings in the areas of constraints on the participation of women in outdoor activities, individual learning from the outdoor experience, and benefits to the women's work in the youth service. Constraints on women's participation in outdoor activities included the need to service the maintenance and leisure needs of others, blind prejudice, dominant attitudes about respectability, financial considerations, fear of the unknown, concerns about their physical fitness, and for some, the all-women environment. Positive outcomes in the area of individual learning included the opportunity to step down from the role of mother and be oneself, the development of confidence in physical skills, the development of new strengths, and the opportunity to reassess life paths. Benefits to the women's work in the youth service included increased knowledge about group processes, role changing, and leadership roles, and an increase in confidence, motivation, and environmental awareness. It was important to value the knowledge, skills, and experience that the women brought to the group. A more flexible approach to the processes of outdoor education courses might increase their accessibility to women. (TD)

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Women Youth Worker and Outdoor Education

by
Di Collins

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Di Collins

Women Youth Workers and Outdoor Education

'I put an advertisement on a youth club noticeboard for a caving trip. No young women signed up. I offered places on outdoor education courses. No women applied. Reasons given were:
I'm not fit enough.
I don't know enough.
I'd feel a fool.
If you say there are men on it (a residential opportunity), I'm not going. They want to be competitive. It'll be a race - let's beat the women.'
(Berry and Collins, 1987:2)

The beginnings of this research project lie in observations of the reticence experienced by a number of women youth workers, in a south coast city, when offered the opportunity to become involved in outdoor education experiences. It was intended that the project would be illuminative, exploring accessibility and indicating alternative approaches to outdoor education experiences for both women youth workers and young women.

A gender imbalance exists in participation in outdoor activities and a lack of female leadership may influence the participation of young women in these activities (Hunt ed., 1990: 169-170). A variety of reasons explaining young women's reluctance to participate have been identified. Research suggests that some girls object to outdoor and adventurous activities because they involve getting cold and wet or becoming hot and sweaty, as well as requiring special clothing and entailing going outside in bad weather (Mason, 1995: 140-141). A study of opportunities for adventure and challenge for young people identified a number of obstacles to young women's participation in adventurous activities - a reluctance of parents to allow daughters to participate in outdoor experiences; a difficulty in finding female friends equally prepared to participate; too few opportunities for necessary personal privacy; outdoor experiences that may be too competitive; outdoor activities that may be seen as action-based rather than people-based, task-oriented rather than process-oriented; genuine fears about activities carried out in open country alone; a lack of female staff (Hunt ed., 1990 : 172). Carpenter and Young (1986:90) suggest that qualified female leaders are essential, acting as positive role models and supporting young women in overcoming some of their prejudices against participating in outdoor activities.

Methods.

This research project involved five residential outdoor education courses for groups of up to ten women youth workers, aged from under 20 to 45. Participation was open to anyone having the support of their line manager and being in a position to be able to free themselves to attend for five days. Courses were designed to enable the women

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to develop enough confidence in their outdoor skills to be able to participate competently in local and national qualifying courses. Although it was recognised that a residential experience would exclude some women, it was felt that separation from home, for a limited period, could create special opportunities for learning. The physical separation could mean a release from external obligations, once such things as childcare have been arranged. It could also give an opportunity for participants to 'centre' on themselves and to be freer from the reinforcement of external constructs.

These residential courses were organised using group work principles. The participants agreed a contract, which included such features as their commitment to involvement in the programme, the circumstances in which it might be appropriate to 'drop out' and the characteristics of acceptable interpersonal behaviour. It was agreed that the development of technical and interpersonal outdoor education skills and the relating of these to youth work situations would become the vehicle for learner development. Thus people-based and process-oriented programmes were developed.

The role of the researcher was complex. It involved group facilitation as well as participant observation. Although the facilitator had ultimate responsibility for the physical and emotional safety of the women, as each course developed, the women were given increased responsibility, power and control. For legal reasons the facilitator retained the ultimate control over safe practice. However, as each residential developed, the facilitator moved from the roles of leader, decision-maker and director to that of listener, supporter and coach. Consequently, each residential developed a unique atmosphere, based on the women's interactions, their sharing of skills, knowledge and power, their moulding of the programme and their reactions to external factors, such as the weather.

The women kept a diary of reflections, and were encouraged to discuss their recordings in review sessions. At the end of the course, each group composed a collective poem in an attempt to capture the spirit of being members of that particular group in the outdoors. A year after their residential experience, the women were invited to complete a questionnaire comprising closed questions for information and open-ended questions for reflection on their perceptions of their development during and after their course. 49% of the women returned completed questionnaires. Line managers also completed open-ended questionnaires relating to developments they had observed in the women. All the replies were analysed by identifying categories of responses. General findings were checked out with those women who had expressed an interest in receiving feedback about the findings of the research.

Results.

There were two broad categories of findings:

i. constraints on the participation of women in outdoor activities;
ii. and individual learning from the outdoor experience.

i. Constraints on the participation of women in outdoor activities.

Traditionally, women's leisure activities may be entwined with servicing the maintenance and leisure needs of others (Dempsey, 1990:35; Green et al, 1990:5; Thompson, 1990:135). Therefore, before engaging in an outdoor education experience, certain maintenance tasks may be undertaken. Heather (38) reported, "I leave the house in good order and discuss food etc with my husband." Mothers may have additional responsibilities, as childcare still tends to rest with women, as highlighted in other research (Deem 1986). Elaine (34) recorded, "Getting a responsible person to look after my children was very difficult." Two women expressed guilt at leaving their

families. Chris (36) wrote of "fear that one of the children might be involved in a serious accident.... an irrational fear.... guilt .... The middle child was in hospital the day I came home, with an asthmatic condition."
Women engaging in outdoor activities may face 'blind prejudice' (Birkett and Peascod, 1989: 11-12). They may be constrained by dominant attitudes about respectability and acceptability. They may regard outdoor education as synonymous with a leisure to which they are not entitled (Henderson, 1990:239). Thus women can be controlled through consent rather than coercion (Deem, 1986: 48; Green et al, 1990: 131). Anne (45) commented, "It was very difficult, even though my children were in their teens. Other people thought I was mad (especially my ex-husband) to even attempt such an exercise." Julie (36) saw the attempt at control as a challenge. "My husband did not believe I would leave them (the family) to engage in outdoor activities, even for such a short time. My husband said, 'You'll be cold all the time. It will rain. You won't go.' That final comment was the challenge that made up my mind. I would go."

For some women, these constraints were compounded by their employment status. Although the opportunities offered in this research project were heavily subsidised, many women youth workers are part-time or unpaid, so financial considerations became an issue. Anne (45) reported, "Finances were tight as I was not paid while the course was on." An anomaly exists because while full-time youth workers can undertake relevant training as part of their work, part-timers are often not entitled to access

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training grants and are expected to take part in training outside their work time.
Some women expressed fears of the unknown. Outdoor education tends to have a macho image (Bolla, 1990: 241). The stories publicised tend to be of daring, bravery and conquest. Moreover, females are not expected to perform as well as men (Humberstone, 1986: 195). Against this background, some women had to overcome previous negative experiences. Chris (36) noted, "The last time I went to Wales was with a school party, hill walking and climbing. I discovered that I had very short legs and don't like climbing. I am not keen on clinging to cliff faces." Other women had concerns about their levels of fitness for the expected activities. Linda (39) commented, "I am very old." Angie (40) said, "I wondered whether I would be capable of keeping up with the rest." Even an all-women environment, designed to create a supportive atmosphere, was threatening to some women, who feared overtones of enforced lesbianism, were wary of the stereotype of female 'bitchiness', or were concerned about succumbing unwillingly to pressures to conform.

ii. Individual learning from the outdoor education experience.

A variety of positive outcomes were expressed, ranging from an opportunity to step down from the role of mother, the development of confidence in physical skills and the opportunity to reassess life paths. Freedom to be oneself was a strong motive for some women to become involved in the outdoor experience. The time to look more objectively at the direction of one's life was important for some. Julie (36) commented, " I was looking forward to the 'space'. I would get away from the pressures of life at home to take stock of myself - where I was going and what I wanted to do." The residential gave Angie (40) the opportunity to make far- reaching life decisions. "I had the freedom to come to my own conclusions. I came back home and for the first time in my life felt like an individual. I got divorced and decided to do something about my education. If I could get up the mountain, what else could I achieve?" The experience gave Val (45) the opportunity to discover new strengths. "To show emotion is okay. Confidence comes from within. With support and good advice I feel I can do anything." Barbara (41) noted, "I feel more confident about joining in activities. I've lost weight and do some weekly exercise which makes me fitter."

There were also benefits to the women's work in the youth service. Lynn (36) recorded, "I learnt about group processes, role changing and leadership roles." Angie and

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Linda's line manager commented, "They are more confident and more able to challenge and have a greater understanding and motivation in general youth work." Some women continued to work towards qualifications in outdoor activities, others felt confident to be more actively involved in supporting outdoor education activities that were developed as part of youth work programmes.

There was evidence of environmental awareness. Connections with the landscape were recorded in the form of poetry written by the group. Starting a walk in a stone circle had an impact on Group One. They wrote, "Reaching back to a human past, in a desolate valley, through a circle of stones..." Others reflected on such things as fungi, the weather, a lone hawthorn, a herd of wild ponies and a rainbow at the foot of a waterfall.

However, there were also some negative reactions to the residential experiences. While the majority of women valued an all-women environment, some found it threatening, non-supportive and unfriendly.

Conclusions.

This research project was illuminative, indicating alternative strategies and processes that would make outdoor education more accessible to some women youth workers and, thus, some young women. For some participants, the critical factor was that the outdoor education experience only involved women. By facilitating the development of interpersonal skills and reviewing the process of the group, as well as developing and monitoring the effectiveness of practical skills, many women were able to develop the confidence to use those practical skills in their youth work. It was important to value the knowledge, skills and experience that the women brought to the group. This may have been different to some, more traditional outdoor education courses, where the focus is on technical competence and 'teaching' interpersonal skills, rather than using the natural learning opportunities that can arise from using the group work process in the outdoors as the vehicle for learning. It is too easy to disregard existing competence and ignore incidental opportunities for reflection and growth that may arise from unscheduled occurrences, such as spectacular sunsets or someone's willingness to share their artistic skills. A more flexible approach to the processes of outdoor education courses might increase their accessibility to women. There is a need for more research in this area.

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